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# Religion and Morality

Ruth A. Gallaher

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## Religion and Morality

The Iowa pioneers were, in a sense, materialists. They had need of food, clothing, and shelter and none of these could be secured without hard, grinding labor. The settlers endured these hardships because they had visions of future farms, new houses, and herds of cattle, but there were many who had ideals above economic necessities and who knew that "man shall not live by bread alone."

The frontier along the Mississippi, like the frontier everywhere, attracted a lawless and turbulent element. Charles A. Murray, an English visitor at Dubuque in 1835, wrote that the barroom "was crowded with a parcel of blackguard noisy miners", but he added, "theft is almost unknown; and though dirks are frequently drawn and pistols fired in savage and drunken brawls, I do not believe that an instance of larceny or house-breaking has occurred."

The majority of settlers in Iowa were industrious and law abiding. They made their own tools and furniture, and if necessary formulated their own laws and provided their own religious services. As early as 1834 a little group of Methodists erected at Dubuque the first church building in Iowa. This little log church was "raised", we are told, "with few hands and without spirits of any kind" — a procedure apparently not according to the prevailing



custom. If there were no church buildings, religious services were held in a cabin, in a store, or outdoors.

George C. Duffield, in describing an open air meeting on the west side of the Des Moines River in August, 1837, relates that the preacher, a Baptist, "strode down toward the water's edge, and, turning toward the rising bank, took off his hat and laid it at his feet." The congregation gathered on the bank, and the women, "who sat bonneted beneath the tree, bared their heads." Perhaps a hundred persons, including Indians, listened to the sermon, of which Mr. Duffield said: "I seldom pass that elm tree to this day but that I unconsciously look at its roots as I did that day at Mr. Hill's direction when he screamed: 'Oh sinner, look! *Look* (bending with hands nearly to the ground) while I take off the hatch of *Hell*!' and with his long bony fingers and writhing body he pictured the tortures of the damned."

Simplicity and fervor were, indeed, the most marked characteristics of many of these early church services. One of the western preachers once visited a church in Massachusetts and his comment on its services throws sidelights on the church of the frontier. "There's your old wooden god, the organ," he said, "bellowing up in the gallery, and a few dandified singers lead in singing and really do it all. The congregation won't sing, and when you pray, they sit down instead of kneeling." The method of seating the congregation also fell under his condemna-



tion, for he said, "The evils that result from mixed sittings of male and female, which are always attendant on the pew system, are neither few nor small."

The religious hysteria which had swept over the West at the beginning of the nineteenth century had largely disappeared by the time Iowa was settled, but camp meetings, where whole families came and stayed for several days, were not uncommon. Exhortations, prayers, tears, and shouts of praise mingled at these meetings, the repressed existence of the lonely and hard-working men and women finding relief in the expression of religious emotion.

Probably no class of men on the frontier suffered more privations and hardships than the pioneer preachers and priests. They made long circuits to reach their appointments, driving or riding horseback through the heat and rains of summer, shoveling their way through snow-drifts in the winter, or dragging wearily through the mud of the early spring. The best paid received only a pittance and many of them helped support themselves and their families by other work.

Education was not deemed a necessity for this work, although some of these missionaries were well educated for their time. Noteworthy in the religious history of Iowa, was the coming of the "Iowa Band", graduates of the Andover Theological Seminary, who came to Iowa in 1843. Their expressed determination was that each should found a church



and all a college. From their efforts arose many Congregational and Presbyterian churches and Grinnell College. Father Mazzuchelli, educated and talented, was one of the best-known Catholic priests in early Iowa.

But there were other and less orthodox influences in the religious life of pioneer Iowans. From Nauvoo, Illinois, came Mormon missionaries; Quakers settled in southern Iowa, bringing with them implacable hostility to slavery; and Abner Kneeland attempted to found an atheistic colony near Farmington, naming it Salubria.

Along with this confusion of religious readjustment the problems of moral standards developed. To Iowa came the outlaw and the missionary, the Puritan from New England and the former slaveholder from the South, the white man and the negro. The Indian was already here. In combining these groups Iowa had one advantage: their ideas and moral standards had to some extent been filtered by sojourns in Ohio, Kentucky, or Illinois, and frontier hardships helped to establish mutual helpfulness and tolerance.

Perhaps some idea of the moral standards of the majority of early Iowans may be derived from a glance at some early laws. In 1839 the legislature provided a fine of fifty dollars or less for any person who should "by menace, profane swearing, vulgar language, or any disorderly or immoral conduct" interrupt any religious assembly.



Governor Robert Lucas, in his message to the First Legislative Assembly of Iowa began the fight against two evils by announcing that he would not appoint to office "any individual of *bad moral character*, or, that may be addicted to *intemperance* or *gambling*." Lotteries, which in many sections of the country were not only permitted by the government but often conducted by it, were forbidden by all three of the constitutions framed for Iowa. Lottery tickets, however, contrary to this constitutional provision, were sometimes advertised in Iowa papers and were doubtless as alluring as present day advertisements of fortunes to be made in Florida real estate or Oklahoma oil wells. In 1842 gambling debts were declared to be void. Hunting, fishing, and working on Sunday were likewise forbidden by law.

Divorces might be granted for such causes as bigamy, adultery, desertion, cruelty, or drunkenness and were the same for husbands and wives. Until 1846 divorces were also granted by the legislature, one act in 1842 divorcing eighteen couples. In spite of this, divorce in pioneer Iowa was looked upon with disfavor: wives were expected to be patient and obedient, according to Saint Paul's advice, the courts usually considered the father's right to the children paramount, and there were not many opportunities for a woman to support herself.

The settlement of Iowa occurred about the time of the rise of the temperance movement and prohibition sentiment developed early here although there



were many influences against it. The first temperance society in Iowa was organized a few weeks before the establishment of the Territory and the early laws show many restrictions on the sale of liquor. In 1855 a prohibitory law was ratified by a popular vote of 25,555 to 22,645.

Hospitality was a striking characteristic of the frontier. No cabin was too small to hold the wayfarers who stopped for shelter. The latch string usually hung outside and if the owner were away any traveller was welcome to lodging and food. Theft was unusual except for horse stealing, an offense considered so serious as to be punished under "lynch law" by hanging. Murders due to quarrels were not unusual and occasionally persons of criminal tendencies maintained lodging houses at strategic points where the unsuspecting guest was deprived of his "roll" if not of his life.

Both the religion and morality of pioneer Iowa were characterized by the independent, self-reliant spirit of the frontier combined with coöperation and toleration of the opinions of others. Partly these qualities were the result of environment, partly they were inherited from earlier pioneers who had written in the Ordinance of 1787 the words, "Religion, morality and knowledge, being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged."

RUTH A. GALLAHER